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Getting to Grips with Gatekeepers in African Migrant Research

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Abstract

This paper examines the methodological challenges and ethical dilemmas posed by gatekeepers in migration research. Although the topic has been an issue of interest and debate among research practitioners globally, it continues to attract fervent scholarly attention. This paper contributes to this growing body of scholarship by focusing on research in contentious terrains, particularly undocumented or irregular migration. The paper explores how the negotiated transactions and interactions between researchers and gatekeepers have continued to colour the research discourse especially in the African context. It maintains that gaining access to research sites and (or) populations is an ever evolving, multi-layered and complex power balancing art which is characterised by compromises and trade-offs as each party seeks to protect its own interests. As central elements to securing entry, access and consent, gatekeepers have a profound capacity to both enable and constrain data collection. Finally, the paper provides some suggestions for formulating strategies to assist researchers to manage gatekeepers.

Introduction

Gaining entry to a community and establishing trust are vital components of cross-cultural and ethnographic research (Maclean 2011; Miller and Bell 2012; Streiner and Sidani 2011). In the discourse on social science research, debates and controversies surround the process through which access to research sites and populations is granted or denied, and the subsequent effect on the credibility and legitimacy of the data (Broadhead and Rist 1976, as cited in Singh and Wassenaar 2016; Buchanan, Boddy and McCalman 1988). Although both migration studies and gatekeepers have been topics of interest and debate among research practitioners globally, they continue to attract fervent scholarly attention. In spite of this, navigating the role and influence of gatekeepers in migrant research, particularly in an African context, remains a challenge. This may be attributed to the fact that scientific research and published academic works on the topic have also been limited. In African contexts, the phenomenon of opening and closing 'gates' to researchers has been largely unexplored and often taken for granted. Another challenge relates to 'academic gatekeepers' who use their data for personal or professional purposes and do not allow data to be accessed by or benefit the public. For many researchers, especially students and their academic supervisors or sponsors, addressing the issue of access and gatekeepers is just another 'ritual' of the traditional research process and only mentioned in passing. If the issue is acknowledged, it is discussed in a small part of the ethical considerations section of the research proposal. Admittedly, this may only be included to fulfil the requirements of institutional approval protocols.

This paper explores the negotiated transactions and interactions between researchers and gatekeepers, and how they continue to colour the research discourse. The analysis is primarily predicated on literature and experiences that focus on undocumented and irregular African transnational or borderland migrants. Strategies are also suggested for overcoming the challenges posed by gatekeepers in order to enhance the general quality of scientific data. It is hoped that this will aid researchers to maintain control over data, develop allies, manage potentially problematic interactions with powerful gatekeepers in migrant communities, and ultimately achieve success in such contentious terrains. Gatekeeping is a dynamic and complex process that both enables and constrains the quality of scientific data (Campbell *et*

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al. 2006; Crowhurst and Kennedy-Macfoy 2013; Walker and Read 2011). While Universities' research approval and ethics committees and donor agencies insist on obtaining permission from authorities and informed consent from potential research participants, researchers consider these requirements to be not only unnecessary but also obstructionist (Belur 2014; Clark 2011; McAreavey and Das 2013; Singh and Wassenaar 2016). The situation is further complicated when the research location requires the researcher to navigate unfamiliar social and cultural norms of conduct (Chaudhuri 2017; Sanghera and Thapar-Björkert 2008) Achieving a balance between the researcher's positionality, moral and ethical responsibilities, and the rights and interests of research populations and their institutions is not an easy task.

This paper is structured around the following objectives: define and situate the nuances of gatekeeping in the context of migrant research; discuss the methodological challenges posed by researcher-gatekeeper transactions; suggest strategies for managing gatekeepers in order to improve the quality of research.

Parameterising Gatekeepers in the Context of Migrant Research

A gatekeeper is variously described as someone or something that controls access to an organisation or institution; or monitors, selects, and withholds information (Bryld, Kamau and Sinigallia 2013; Neuman 2012; Reeves 2010; Singh and Wassenaar 2016). Gatekeepers are the points of contact for individuals outside the organisation which link the organisation with the outside environment; and internally, gatekeepers fulfil liaison and co-ordination roles (Haas n.d). The 'gatekeeper' concept and metaphor originated from Kurt Lewin's (1943) gatekeeping theory. It has been effectively applied in studies on how the media filters what is newsworthy (Roberts 2005; Shoemaker and Vos 2009) and to explain the filtering roles of scholarly editors of publishing houses that act as intermediaries between the production and consumption of printed materials (Coser, Kadushin and Powell 1982; Sato 2012). In this way, editors act as the gatekeepers of academic knowledge.

In migration studies, gatekeepers include bureaucrats who possess the power and authority to grant permission to cross state borders and to access a given migrant community. Beyond these officials, there are also local informal contact persons who monitor flows of information from undocumented or irregular migrants. For Iacovetta (2006), gatekeeping covers the entire multitude of reception, citizenship and regulatory activities related to migration. Thus negotiating gatekeepers is particularly relevant, as access to a research population is often mediated via multiple institutions (Chaudhuri 2017 and Mainwaring 2016). Gatekeeping occurs at multiple levels and on multiple sides of the research space. According to Singh and Wassenaar (2016), institutions and organisations have an autonomous right to permit or deny access to their information, space, personnel, and clients or service users for research purposes; unless such information is already in the public domain or published. Gaining access to and co-operation from an organisation or its populations is a complex, layered process that involves gatekeepers and associated challenges that are negotiated at various levels; each with the potential to influence the research process. Gatekeeping is not what some people do to others but, is an integral part of the societal structures of which all knowledge production is a part (Pellander 2016).

Gatekeepers have often been confused with key informants and intermediaries which makes it difficult to draw a clear line between research participants and gatekeepers. With specific reference to borderland migration, migrants may constitute a 'hidden population' who engage in illicit trading, rule breaking or smuggling, and other activities which make them difficult to investigate (Neuman 2012). In Christian's (2017) study of gatekeepers in conflict zones, gatekeepers were organic to the research population; they were nearly always involved with or intensely interested in the well-being of those they served and protected. In such contexts, irrespective of whether participants are victims, villains or both, they are still organised under gatekeepers. Their willingness to grant and provide access comes with an

unspoken acknowledgement of their willingness to subvert or at least influence the research process for socio-economic and political purposes – be they gainful or defensive in nature (Christian 2017).

There are numerous studies within and outside Africa on the nature or characteristics of migrants but these studies have not indicated any prominent methodological challenges associated with researcher-gatekeeper relationships. Notable research on Zimbabwean migrants in neighbouring countries include: Chikanda (2019), Galvin (2015 and 2017), Dzingirai *et al*. (2015), and Chereni (2014). McGregor and Primorac (2010), Muzondidya (2010), Betts (2010) and Maphosa's (2011) works on transnational circulatory migrants on the Zimbabwe-South Africa borderlands add to earlier investigations by Muzvidziwa (2005) on the gendered dimension of Zimbabwean cross border traders, and Dodson (2008) and Muthuki's (2013) work on gender inequality among African professional migrants in South Africa.

Apart from work on the Zimbabwean diaspora, other scholars, such as Levitt (2009), have explored transnationalism in Europe and observed that migrants belonged to two or more societies simultaneously. Similar studies include Bryld *et al*.'s (2013) experiences in relation to internally displaced Somalis in Mogadishu, Black's (2003) study on forced migration in relation to the displacement and return of refugees in Ethiopia, Betts, Omata and Bloom's (2017) account of the variations in economic outcomes for refugees in Uganda, Lopez-Dicastillo and Belintxon's (2014) work on the Moroccan diaspora in Germany and Spain, and Brettell's (2003) work on the Portuguese diaspora in France and Canada. These studies address the methodological challenges that confront migrant researchers and the essential, but often neglected, role of gatekeepers in the generation of quality scientific data. The studies also concluded that the decision to move within and out of an African country into a neighbouring one or beyond was predominately a forced one due to political and economic crises. Movements were also characterised by illegal and undocumented entries through unofficial border points.

Migrants are highly mobile and vulnerable populations. They include asylum-seekers, political refugees, economic and survival migrants and irregular or circulatory cross- border traders and day trippers. In the Zimbabwean case, data collection on migration remains an essentially difficult task that is compounded by unreliable statistics and the influence of border control agents (Zanamwe and Devillard 2010). As Zimbabwean migrants in neighbouring countries are in many cases undocumented, their movements are often mediated by gatekeepers; consistent with their hidden and fluid mobility patterns. Migrants endure gut-wrenching ordeals in their interactions with border security personnel, migration bureaucrats and other mobility gatekeepers, such as the International Organisation for Migration (IOM). In addition, borderlands can simultaneously become seedbeds of cosmopolitanism, sites of cultural closure, or both where locating the boundaries and grounds of gatekeeping remains challenging.

The ways in which borderland migrants negotiate with their smugglers, amongst themselves, and with border guards or security personnel in order to circumvent state controls when entering states clandestinely render them a 'hidden population'. This makes them difficult to recruit for research purposes (Mainwaring 2016). A study in the Ghana-Togo borderlands by Raunet (2016) used the structure and agency lens to analyse migrant mobility and found that borderland officials were not the only actors in the regulation of mobility as traditional chiefs had sufficient power to act as gatekeepers. Chiefs were the gatekeepers at the crossroads between state borders, the borderland village's limits and regional limits. The constantly negotiated transactions and interactions between chiefs, communities and border officials shaped borderland mobility practices. Kovacs' (2017) work on intimate mixed partner relationships between members of a highly transnational Chinese migrant population and members of the local Hungarian society revealed a number of methodological challenges that share similarities with the Ghana-Togo borderlands study. Borderland bureaucrats may only interact with migrants on arrival or during applications for residence permits. Although documented, they remain a part of the closed and hidden networks which may

not be easily accessible.

Migration legislation, rules and structures restricting access to information also constitute formal gatekeepers (Pellander 2016). The formal process of securing entry and access requires understanding an organisation's operational hierarchy, the rules on professional etiquette, and strategic planning to recruit research participants. For example, in attempting to access vulnerable groups such as asylum-seekers or refugees in concentrated or camp based centres such as Dukwi Refugee Camp and the Centre for Illegal Immigrants in Francistown (Botswana), researchers may face un-cooperative or unwilling bureaucrats, prohibitive research permit application procedures and possible post-interview risk. This is further complicated by restrictive immigration laws, enhanced border controls, the criminalisation of migrants, and punitive deportation practices (Galvin 2017). Due to their visibility and direct contact with migrants, immigration officers can be referred to as primary gatekeepers in migrant research. However, the situation differs in countries such as Uganda where there is a limited refugee encampment policy. Access to refugees may be facilitated by local informal leadership structures in rural settlements. As Bryld *et al*. (2013) observed in relation to Somali Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Mogadishu, 'power holders' within the camps utilised their links and relationships with government officials to grant or deny access to researchers.

Most literature on migration is instructive on the role of state policies and restrictions as forms of formal gatekeeping but downplay migrants' own agency. However, studies, such as Chaudhuri's (2017) ethnographic inquiry into interactions with three groups of gatekeepers, found that those with the least amount of formal bureaucratic power were the ones that performed the most problematic kind of gatekeeping. The informal process involves the researcher's ability to respect the boundaries of the access granted, and adopt an objective and formal stance to the research process. Gatekeepers can therefore be explicit and implicit at various levels. A researcher may be granted formal research permission or authority to access a community but later discover that the social and psychological barriers which are mediated by gender and culture are non-permissive. In some communities a researcher may require permission from a husband or male partner to access a female participant. This is supported by Pellander (2016) and Kovacs' (2017) studies among married migrants in Europe which revealed the potential of male partners to act as obstacles to quality data collection. Partners who were interviewed separately tended to give richer accounts than the ones interviewed as a couple.

The Challenge of Securing Access to and Co-operation from Gatekeepers

Securing access and co-operation for research is influenced by multiple factors. Broadhead and Rist (1976, as cited in Singh and Wassenaar 2016) outlined the potential influence of gatekeepers in determining the conditions of entry into the organisation, access to data and respondents, restrictions and control over the scope of data analysis and publication.

Firstly, a gatekeeper's understanding of the social value of the study mediates the data collection process. For example, the level of potential risks and costs should be established before entering into a research agreement. This is also influenced by the nature of research and the target population. Secondly, the relationship between the gatekeeper and researcher needs to be delineated so as to minimise potential bias in sample selection and recruitment, and maximise voluntary participation. Thirdly, the researcher's positionality is closely associated with the insider-outsider distinction that influences acceptance and eliciting rich data (Belur 2014; Mikecz 2012; Petkov and Kaoullas 2016). Finally, gatekeeper's trust and support of the research project as well as the conditions attached to granting of permission will influence the research process.

The permission granted by formal gatekeepers may become obsolete due to the control or influence

of informal or implicit gatekeepers at every level with varying degrees of acceptance. Securing entry and access can be analogous to 'peeling off' an onion. The process looks simple with all layers appearing permissive but in practice is very complex. Entry involves receiving both official authorisation and achieving psychological entry which requires becoming sufficiently trusted and accepted into a social system (Miller and Bell 2012). Each level of gatekeeping has control over the next levels. Research participants may also perceive the support of formal gatekeepers as an 'endorsement of authority' which can lead to concealment of information. Gatekeepers cannot legitimately provide proxy consent on behalf of research populations as such permission does not supplant the need for informed consent from the targeted sample (Gallo *et al*. 2012). Obtaining gatekeeper permission from higher levels does not always guarantee co-operation from multiple layers of organisational membership, and one should never overlook individual autonomy to refuse research participation (Wanat 2008). This is supported by Berwick, Ogle and Wright's (2003) observation that gatekeeping was not just the privilege of those with legitimised power and position, but a force that can be exerted at any level in an organisation.

Getting the Right Gatekeepers

In highly mobile and transitory migrant communities, getting the right gatekeeper can be as difficult as accessing the right research subjects. In their natural setting, gatekeepers may be as slippery as fish in water. One of the biggest challenges is the selection of the right gatekeeper(s). Interestingly, in their proposals, most researchers discuss their sampling designs and sizes but most do not mention how they plan to handle gatekeepers. In reality, it may be difficult and sometimes only due to a bit of luck that one successfully negotiates entry through different layers of gatekeepers (Neuman 2012). Reflecting on my own lived experiences on the Zimbabwe-Botswana borderlands between 2009 and 2017, it was difficult to access research participants. For a regular cross-border or circulatory migrant joining a network becomes natural. These networks often include bus or truck drivers and their assistants. Their role in facilitating safe border-crossing, particularly for undocumented migrants, renders them suitable candidates for both intermediary and gatekeeping responsibilities. Migration is often 'network mediated mobility' and any inquiry into such highly mobile transnational communities relies heavily on the dictates of the network or community gatekeepers.

Most migration in Africa involves marginalised people, who often engage in illegal or illicit livelihood activities organised through covert migration gatekeepers. Securing access to these populations may require intense bargaining or negotiation. Consequently, gatekeeping becomes stricter and more complex as one goes deeper into the inner circles of such networks. In such cases, both gatekeepers and research participants are wary of strangers who could expose their activities and, consequently, jeopardize their livelihoods. It is also possible to approach the wrong gatekeeper, someone who is troubling and always seeking to influence the direction of the study and its results. Gatekeeper mediated studies may not be easy to replicate or to complete any member-checking to validate the data.

Double Hermeneutics

Both migrants and researchers are reflexive actors facing the dilemma of, what Anthony Giddens (1984) termed, the 'double hermeneutics'. Those being studied use language to describe their actions (discursive consciousness) while the researcher uses language to describe the actions of those being studied. Ritzer (2000) noted that social science researchers can alter the world they study which can lead to distorted findings and conclusions. Negotiating entry into groups or networks such as illegal migrants or 'border-jumpers' along the Zimbabwe-South Africa or Botswana borderlands, requires careful staging or navigation. Most researchers struggle to maintain a successful balance between personal subjectivities and a distance that would enable them to learn from the members of the community (Maphosa 2011). The issue of

balancing insider-outsider identity poses ethical challenges especially during participant observation. Participant observation, as the central method of ethnographic fieldwork, requires finding the right balance between intimacy and distance (Ostermann 2011) and addressing the ethical challenge of balancing 'building rapport' and 'faking friendship' (Duncombe and Jessop 2012).

Power, Positionality and Patronages

Power dynamics and researcher positionality have relevance for researchers in any area where gatekeepers are used to access participants (Becker *et al*. 2005; McAreavey and Das 2013). Gatekeepers may perceive the proposed research as a threat to the status quo or be wary of potential alienation during the research process. There may also be conflict between gatekeepers themselves which can disrupt the smooth flow of the process. As Bryld *et al*. (2013) experienced in relation to gatekeeping within the IDPs in Mogadishu, in some interviews there was competition to become a gatekeeper and in others there were conflicting gatekeepers as gatekeepers derived spoils from the humanitarian crisis. Thus migrant mobility is mediated via multiple institutions, structures and patronage networks (Chaudhuri 2017; Mainwaring 2016; Musinguzi 2011). This is consistent with Raunet's (2016) experience with gatekeepers on the Ghana-Togo borderlands and Maphosa's (2011) findings on the South African-Zimbabwe border where the smuggling of goods and people was facilitated by local, self-proclaimed power holders. In all these cases, gatekeepers became 'conduits and opportunities' or 'livelihood gatekeepers' (Raunet 2016). In the Ghana-Togo borderlands, local chiefs were a competing authority to the state in cross border livelihoods and smuggling but were also indispensable allies acting as migration gatekeepers. Thus the actions of local chiefs within the constraints and limits placed by structure allow for 'processes of production and reproduction of borders' (Brunet-Jailey 2011 cited in Raunet 2016:10).

Consistent with their power and interests, gatekeepers may be sceptical of granting researchers entry or access in the interests of the safety and security of the research population and/or for their own parochial economic interests. Additionally, elites such as gatekeepers may resist co-operation, position the researcher as an adversary, suspect the researcher of association with rival elites or feel that disclosed information might be intercepted and used with ill intent (Mickecz 2012; Petkov and Kaoullas 2016). Gatekeepers may also be concerned that research reports could expose their secret activities or practices (Alcadipani and Hodgson 2009). Hence, accessing research populations whose livelihoods are entirely dependent on negotiating borders and migration controls is a challenge. To this effect, gatekeepers can manipulate the data collection, the member checking and feedback processes which can result in a biased research output. Such predatory tendencies pose significant challenges to researchers.

The power balance between the researcher and gatekeeper engenders rapport and facilitates meaningful and beneficial data collection. Sanghera and Thapar-Björkert (2008) contend that the context influences the way gatekeepers position the researcher, and vice-versa. The migration process produces gendered encounters as participants immerse themselves into new cultural contexts creating new gender regimes which require renegotiation (Muthuki 2013). Some gatekeepers may be more receptive to female researchers whom they perceive to pose no risk or harm to the research population. Male gatekeepers may become hostile or violent toward female researchers. In some contexts female researchers have been subjected to male violence and harassment which has forced them to back–off or only continue their study covertly (Thambiah *et al*. 2016). This again creates more ethical challenges.

Multi-faced Insiders

For researchers, one of the methodological challenges arising from the role of gatekeepers is handling their multi-faced outlook that is evident in their tendency to perform and vacillate between various and seemingly isomorphic roles such as key informants, intermediaries, co-opted observers, brokers, advocates

and blockers. As brokers, gatekeepers help researchers overcome interview resistance especially by elites due to their vast knowledge of political and organisational protocols. This often occurs when the gatekeepers consider themselves to be experts in the field. For example, migration bureaucrats who initially grant the researcher permission can eventually directly or indirectly participate in the study which results in information distortion (Mikecz 2012; Petkov and Kaoullas 2016).

Gatekeepers acting as intermediaries can also influence the sampling process. In the case of respondent driven sampling this may result in the selection of only those participants most likely to provide biased data favourable to the authority's position. While intermediaries may decrease respondent resistance they can also enhance concealment of information, especially when completed questionnaires are returned through the gatekeeper or an intermediary's office or interviews are conducted in their presence. The situation may be further complicated when a male spouse becomes both the informal gatekeeper and intermediary during interviews. Access to participants, obtaining informed consent, establishing the role of the researcher and earning the trust of the participants can be at the pleasure of the intermediary or broker. Gatekeepers can block researchers from accessing vulnerable populations and act as advocates for their protection. Thus confusion around executing or combining roles may create conflict between the researcher and gatekeepers. In both cases, participants may need to be sheltered from research that could be too insensitive and intrusive (Walker and Read 2011). Gatekeepers may subtly subvert the research process by conniving with research participants to understate or exaggerate the condition under investigation (Shenton and Hayter 2004). In a study on the unmet reproductive health needs of immigrants and refugees in Botswana, Oucho and Ama (2009) observed that both expatriate and local health care providers may have been unwilling to provide negative information that could threaten their careers.

Self-blocking: Researchers as Key Masters

Negotiating entry, accessing research populations, choosing a sampling design and size, and selecting what data to collect and analyse, are complex processes that are inherently political and personal. While the gatekeeper-researcher relationship contributes significantly to the outcome of the research, the researcher's own agency is equally important. Researchers, especially university students, must address their own supervisors and ethical approval gatekeepers but should be cautious not to become their own gatekeepers; or fall into a state of 'self-blocking'. Even if permission is granted, researchers have one more challenge to navigate: 'their own self'. They can become gatekeepers themselves, what Campell *et al*. (2006) called 'key masters'. Consistent with gatekeeping theory (Shoemaker and Vos 2009), researchers, just like journalists, continuously filter what information to collect, analyse and even publish. This form of 'self-restriction' or 'self-negotiation' also characterises research that is conducted under the rubric of 'anthropology at home' in which researchers write about their own cultures from a point of intimate affinity (Narayan 1993). Gatekeepers may not necessarily be individuals existing 'out there' waiting for researchers to outwit them. Researchers can also over-invest in navigating gatekeepers at the expense of 'self-awareness. This can lead to 'observer hubris', where one over-estimates one's bargaining power and under-estimates that of the gatekeepers and research subjects at all levels.

Exiting Fieldwork

While the researcher may successfully get a 'foot in the door,' persistent and prolonged engagements with gatekeepers, key informants, intermediaries and the research populations can often make exiting the field difficult. This may occur when gatekeepers anticipate personal benefits that can be derived from their co-operation, especially with funded research. Their willingness to participate can be a calculated move. Such gatekeepers closely monitor the researcher's departure in order to safeguard their interests.

Similarly, research participants such as irregular migrants may expect to be protected against future arrest or harassment by authorities. This is a corollary to the challenge of balancing, what Muzvidziwa (2005) called, the 'life-time debt' researchers owe to participants with the researcher's 'public life after ethnography'. Some gatekeepers set restrictive conditions for separation or exiting the fieldwork in the gatekeeper-researcher contract such as allowing the gatekeeper to censor the member-checking process and publication of results.

Strategies for Managing Gatekeepers

Gaining permission to enter a study site is a very different process from actually securing both physical and psychological access. 'Getting in' may be easy but 'staying in' is a different matter. At every stage, access to participants and data needs to be carefully handled, and continually renegotiated. The challenge of gatekeepers can be mitigated by engaging in extended fieldwork especially through participant observation. As Hume and Mulcock (2004) observed, participant observation requires researchers to use their own social values as a primary research tool. The strategy enables the process of 'stepping in' and 'stepping out' which also enhances the quality of data collection through continued reflection on the methods, and the initial set of research questions or hypotheses. This compels the researchers to adapt their methods to the peculiarities of the field situation (Ostermann 2011). This, however, depends on the nature of the research. Doctoral candidates, especially those following ethnographic approaches, may successfully pursue this avenue while being wary of self-blocking. The challenge is that this often occurs unconsciously. 'Staying in' can be ensured and sustained by becoming an 'insider', as opposed to 'an outsider', with access to informal structures and practices (Reeves 2010). Techniques such as 'prolonged engagement' or 'immersing oneself in a community', and the 'chameleon approach' (Shenton and Hayter 2004), though risky in sensitive spaces, ensures acceptance by avoiding being wildly incongruous with the world of participants. For example, when the researcher shares common values and cultural practices with the research participants the gates may be left wide open. One can also choose, where possible, to become a member of staff on a voluntary or internship basis. However, this is a necessary but not sufficient condition for securing entry and access. On numerous occasions researchers have been denied access to research populations even in their own organisations without any reasons being provided.

One of the most effective strategies for managing gatekeepers is the promotion of participation and reciprocity (Shenton and Hayter 2004). Formal gatekeepers are more likely to show willingness if they become involved from the outset of the study. There is also need to ensure that gatekeepers are not alienated by the research process (Duke 2002). Thus the primary gatekeepers can be included as part of the research: gatekeeper–cum-researcher. This can be facilitated by either tacit or implicit co-option and can help to build relationships of conviviality. As McFadyen and Ranking (2016) observed, the level of understanding of the research, shared information on the purpose of the research, and raising gatekeeper's motivation to participate in the research greatly influenced the co-operation of gatekeepers. Communication is therefore critical in overcoming the challenges associated with gatekeeping. The strategy of full disclosure helps to build a more robust trust and genuine rapport (Miller and Bell 2012). However, if not managed carefully, this may also be used as a control strategy that ensures the maintenance of the primary gatekeeper's power thus undermining the freedom or independence of the researcher. Researchers need to be aware that the trajectory of fieldwork is shaped by the manner in which relationships with formal and informal gatekeepers are developed and played out (Reeves 2010).

Coming into contact with the right gatekeeper remains a challenge. To get past this hurdle, researchers have to make a choice early in the research process to pursue either the navigator or the way-finder route. As Singh and Wassenaar (2016) suggested, researchers need to engage in strategic planning

to build gatekeeper support in order to gather quality scientific data. Navigation involves a pro-active approach that includes anticipating potential barriers at each stage;: pre-entry, entry, during fieldwork, and exiting. Way-finding is adopting a 'strategy less' and re-active approach that involves 'living by chance' and handling gatekeeping challenges as the research unfolds. In their most extreme forms both approaches pose serious challenges to research. Navigation assumes a rational, objectivist and modernist order that assumes perfect knowledge of the information needed to make decisions. In migration research, the navigator adopts a traditional approach in which the characteristics of migrants and migration gatekeepers are well-known, and exist 'out there' to be used by researchers. Unlike navigators, way-finders tend to take chances and follow emerging realities. The dialogue between researcher and gatekeeper is context and situation-specific. Therefore, selecting the right gatekeeper may require a combination of navigation and way-finding.

Power differentials between the researcher and gatekeepers can impact on the data collection processes and the ways in which these may be moderated by factors such as gender. In an African context, researchers are advised not to downplay the importance of negotiating with male "gatekeepers" in gaining access to female participants (Mandel 2003). For example, informal access may be problematic as some gatekeepers may be unsupportive of female researchers, particularly in male-dominated environments. Lund, Panda and Dahl's (2016) study among indigenous women in Dehli, India, concluded that regardless of how much effort was made to create a level playing field within the researcher-gatekeeper dialogue, inequality continued to exist. The relationships of power inherent in the research act calls for 'research bargains' (Horwood and Moon 2003). Researchers need to confront not only the 'ethics' but the politics of inquiry. Collaborative research may assist in these situations. It is important to understand the role and power of each research participant as well as their contribution to creating spaces of inclusion. The questions of values and power need to be carefully considered through exercising critical judgement or, what Flyvbjerg (2001) termed, *phronesis* (McAreavey and Das 2013). Phronesis requires a willingness to engage with and to resist, but to do so within a particular context and to make decisions after critical consideration of issues that present themselves in the course of research. Balancing the competing interests of the researcher, gatekeepers and research population is a delicate exercise requiring skill and engagement (McAreavey and Das 2013). This helps to minimise different person-factor barriers to data collection.

This paper has also noted that person-factors are not necessarily external to the researcher. It is important to avoid becoming one's own gatekeeper. This form of 'conceptual lock-in' can be redressed by 'defocusing' or loosening the boundaries of one's own self-awareness (Neuman 2012). This may not be easy and requires intense self-reflection. One of the strategies for dealing with self-restriction is through 'bracketing': a methodological device of phenomenological inquiry that requires a deliberate putting aside of one's own repertoires of knowledge, values, beliefs and experiences about a phenomenon (Chan, Fung and Chien 2013; Gearing 2004).

Another strategy for dealing with problematic gatekeepers is the use of personal contacts such as acquaintances, friends and relatives as intermediaries. Intermediaries enhance trust building. Trust building allows participants to develop the confidence to share information and know that it will not be abused or misused. Some researchers have found that having a friend or intermediary vouch for them has made access easier to negotiate (Duke 2002; Johl and Renganathan 2010; Petkov and Kaoullas 2016; Wilkes 1999).

Researchers can successfully gain access to the research population by combining both the formal and personal approaches to negotiating past gatekeepers. This is also influenced by the nature of the gatekeepers. Researchers need to identify explicit and implicit gatekeepers to initiate and build collaborative networks to support the research. This approach allows the researcher to reach out to implicit gatekeepers early in the research process. However, vacillating between the formal and informal approaches

is inevitably a delicate balancing act.

To deal with gatekeepers who may block effective sampling of participants, researchers may triangulate both methodologies and investigators. Novice researchers, particularly students, often pursue 'solo runs' during fieldwork and face various types and levels of gatekeepers. Investigator triangulation or the use of multiple observers or investigators can potentially help with the multi-level challenges posed by gatekeeping (Archibald 2016). Therefore, recruiting research assistants or collaborating with faculty colleagues is strongly recommended.

The emergence of digital technology calls into question the efficacy and sustainability of the traditional 'opening and closing' of gates to researchers. The traditional definition of 'gatekeeper' may no longer be useful as the roles of 'gatekeepers' and the 'gated' have become more fluid and interchangeable (Helberger *et al*. 2015). Therefore, virtual anthropological fieldwork could successfully overcome the challenge of gatekeepers by exploiting the opportunities created by digital technology. The use of social media tools, such as WhatsApp, to gain access to research populations can be an effective strategy in dealing with troubling gatekeepers. Scholars such as Roberts (2005), Chin-Fook and Simmonds (2011), Bro and Wallberg (2014), and Kovacs (2017) found the use of the internet or digital sources to be effective information gathering instruments without physically labouring past the traditional gatekeepers. Due to the vulnerability of undocumented migrants, the physical presence of a gatekeeper during a face to face interview may obstruct free communication. Migrants are often a networked society and thus the use of new media could be a powerful strategy. Social media technologies tend to collapse multiple contexts and thus bring together distinct audiences (Boyd 2006). In cases where trust between the outsider and participants would have been established, the new media may facilitate communication free from gatekeeper 'surveillance'. This context collapse allows 'users to quickly diffuse information across their entire network and facilitate interaction across diverse groups of individuals who would otherwise be unlikely to communicate' (Vitak 2012:451). Therefore, combining information collected through online spaces with that from face to face interviews provides an opportunity to overcome the obstacles presented by traditional gatekeepers.

Conclusion

This paper sought to examine the methodological challenges and ethical dilemmas posed by gatekeepers in migration research. It considered their impact on the quality of research and how these can be addressed. Notable challenges include securing the co-operation of gatekeepers, approaching the right gatekeepers, double hermeneutics, and the power and positionality of researchers. The paper resolved that gatekeepers bring both positives and negatives to the research process. In fact, as Maclean (2011) observed, access provided and denied can result in slanted data. Thus gatekeepers are both a threat to and a necessary feature of research (Berwick *et al*. 2003; Campbell *et al.*2006; Wanat 2008).

Gatekeepers exist across all levels of an organisation or community, both explicitly and implicitly. They perform a myriad of roles either as primary or secondary gatekeepers including: brokering, mediating, blocking, and co-ordinating entry and access to research sites, populations and information. They engage in shape shifting. This kind of plasticity consequently renders any prescription for mitigating strategies impractical. Thus both qualitative and quantitative researchers need to utilise context-specific techniques that acknowledge the complexity of gatekeeping in enabling and constraining the quality of scientific research. Researchers need the capacity to negotiate, evaluate, and balance research ethics with practical considerations (McAreavey and Das 2013). This ensures that researchers gain entry into research communities as admitted researchers; but requires careful staging and negotiation. Consequently, 'covert' observations are often unavoidable but rarely acknowledged by researchers.

There is little doubt that the nuances and dynamics of gatekeeping have a profound capacity to facilitate and inhibit the research process. The relationship between gatekeepers and researchers

is interactive as both exercise power to safeguard their respective interests. Researcher-gatekeeper interactions and transactions are power-balancing activities that are anchored on compromises and trade-offs.

This paper recommends further research on the influence of gender, particularly on the ways in which feminist research methods can address particular challenges in accessing female interlocutors among migrant communities. New spaces of connection and engagement in light of new media also call for studies that utilise digital research methods. Finally, autobiographical studies that reflect on the perspectives or lived experiences of gatekeepers could be insightful to both scholars and practitioners in the field of migration, especially in an African context.

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